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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 003698

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ITALY/TURKEY: CONFIDENT TURKEY WILL RECEIVE A
"YES", BUT URGES US LOW PROFILE

Classified By: A/DCM TOM COUNTRYMAN. REASON: 1.5 (B)(D)

11. (C) On September 23, MFA Director for Turkey/Cyprus Affairs Renato Ricci told poloff that while his government was still confident that Turkey would receive a "yes" on a date to begin EU accession negotiations at the December Council, recent moves to include criminalizing adultery in the country's penal code have given "a boost" to those in Europe who oppose Turkish membership, no matter how much progress Ankara makes on the Copenhagen Criteria.

12. (C) Ricci was particularly disappointed because in his view "everything had been going smoothly" for Turkish accession. "The timing could not have been worse" for Ankara to propose such measures as part of its penal code. "It is almost as if Ankara was trying to sabotage its own candidacy," he lamented. The only rational explanation Ricci could see for the harsh tone of the penal code reform was that reforms implemented to date, such as those dealing with torture, military participation in government and Kurdish human rights did not conflict with Islam. Penal code provisions dealing with adultery do have a religious foundation, and the more fundamentalist members of the Turkish parliament may feel that EU pressure concerning such laws amount to interference in Turkey's internal affairs. Certainly the rhetoric of recent days between Ankara and certain member state officials would indicate that that is the trend, said Ricci.

13. (C) Ricci was preparing for an internal MFA meeting "at the highest levels" on September 24 to discuss Italy's role in putting Turkish accession back on track. One option under discussion was an invitation to PM Erdogan to visit Rome in October. Ricci believes the approach taken by UK FM Straw was the best - a pragmatic view which focuses on the excellent progress made by Turkey on the Copenhagen Criteria thus far, without sentimental rhetoric or references to "culture clashes." The Dutch Presidency would also be an ally in this approach.

14. (C) Ricci stressed that if Turkey was not given a date in December it would be "a historic opportunity lost," and result in Turkey slipping further and further into a theocracy. HeQins somewhat optimistic, and predicted a forward leaning recommendation by the Commission, with many "buts," and a "yes" in December, but not unconditional. He suggested that it was important for the United States to reiterate its views in the run-up to the December Council, but in a "quiet, low profile" manner. Public statements by the USG criticizing the process in Brussels or views of individual member states would hinder, not help, Turkey's progress.

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